Acorn

ISSUE 24 AUTUMN 1992

NEWS LETTER

COLOSSUS
'We Have Lift-Off!'

'Seven, six, five . . . we go for main engine start . . . two, one, lift-off. We have lift-off.'

If all goes to plan (it didn't quite always) our guests at events watching Kevin Coleman present new products see a computer-produced picture of the space shuttle lifting off, complete with enough sound volume to make them feel they are under the booster rockets!

I'm not totally clear why I enjoy doing behind-the-scenes stuff at launch events. I used to do the odd bit of theatre lighting and sound at University, and maybe it's a yearning back to that. Or maybe it's a desire to get out on the stage myself – subconsciously hoping that someone won't be able to go on and I can do it . . .

So, how does the (hopefully) polished production on the day all come together? I'll give you a little flavour.

When we get to a venue to set up, the first thing that needs to be checked is where we are actually going to put the staging, and how we are going to seat all visitors. Normally, this is easy – but at one event, there had been a last-minute rush of people wanting to come, and we had to move to a totally different room in order to seat them all.

Peter Flitton (Acorn's multitalented haulage contractor) and his sons unload the stage from their truck, and start building it. In the meantime, the display (clip) systems and computers for the exhibition part of the day are unloaded, and set up in a separate room. That's always a worry in itself at launch events, as many of the computers that we will use are hand-build prototypes – and we never quite know what's happened to them in the back of the trailer! Our worries are nearly always groundless – a tribute to the technicians.

The stage itself is now starting to take shape. On the left is a lectern, which, from the audience's viewpoint, has a couple of glass plates mounted at an angle in front. From the presenter's viewpoint, these are much more useful – the script scrolls past on these, so actually you seem to be looking towards the audience, but really, you're reading the script! There's a large screen that forms part of the stage, and two turntables, which are used to reveal new products to the audience. All the presenters have to do in theory is read their scripts – Mike O'Riordan, Kevin Coleman, Terry Shurwood, Mike Fern, Peter Talbot and Bob Coates all did presentations. I say in theory, because one or two slight technical hitches did occur. If you can think of a good clean joke that Peter Talbot could use the next time his prompt screen goes blank – I'm sure he would appreciate it.

Inn on the Park – the setting-up begins

Inn on the Park – Mike O'Riordan, ready for the 'off'

Harrogate – taking a breather

At Birmingham, there was (due to local authority regulations) a further presentation. Sharon Yoxall and Brian Salter went on to the stage, and while Sharon read a safety message telling the audience where the fire escapes were, Brian indicated them in his best Air Stewardess manner. This raised so much of a laugh from the audience that I thought we should do it again at the next event – but I was overruled.

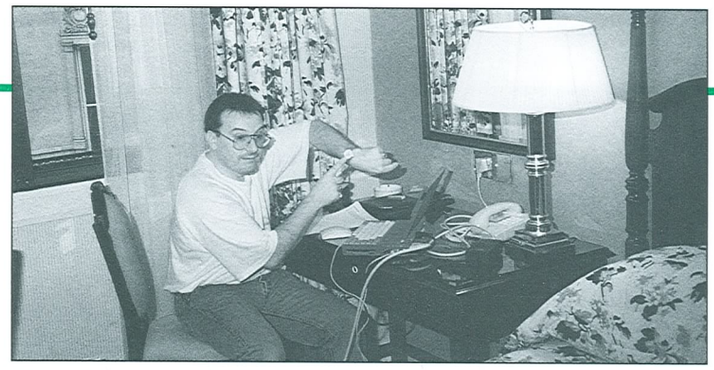
The whole stage takes about three hours to set up; sound video and lighting about four hours, some of which at least can be run concurrently. This isn't too bad the first day – but if you have events on two consecutive days a hundred miles apart (Birmingham and Harrogate) it's a bit tiring.

The very first day that we set up at the Inn on the Park (on Hyde Park corner) it was well after midnight that Kevin and I decided to get something to eat. Shunning hotel food we went in search of open restaurants. Failure – we ended up in the Burger King on Piccadilly Circus. Who said this life was glamorous?!

Anyway, I've described how the stage looked. What the audience couldn't see was all the other people involved. At the back of the auditorium sits Alex, the stage manager. His job is to keep everyone in order. With him sit Sunil (lights) and John (sound). Backstage sit Susie (prompt system), Jem (video tape), me (computer graphics), and running around backstage sorting out smoke effects, the ▶

COLOSSUS
continued

Harrogate – Bob Coates in expansive mood



Kevin Coleman – who said this life was glamorous?

Harrogate – Mike Fern is put through his paces

turntables for revealing products and pushing presenters on-stage is Brian Salter.

I wasn't always behind the scenes – I had two other 'jobs' – one was assisting with the demonstrations in the exhibition area – the other was as the unofficial photographer. I hope the shots come out!

It's all a lot of fun, but you realise how much work has to go in from all sections of Acorn to get this sort of show off the ground. All divisions needed to co-operate to make this work, and they did. There are many unsung heroes. But it did all come together. And as Kevin said in his presentation, 'All these products have just got to go with a bang. If you get behind us now, then this is what we are going to do to the opposition' – followed by a very loud bang with two stage explosions. Ooh – I forgot to tell you that we needed to get the automatic sprinklers turned off in the presentation rooms, didn't I. . . .

Alastair France ■

'Big Bang' Theory Agreed

This is a summary of how project Colossus was conceived, designed and executed.

During the early spring of 1992, deep in the tin hut otherwise known as the epicentre of all things good, e.g. Product Marketing, the realisation on everybody's mind was the magnitude of what Acorn was attempting to do in terms of project Adelaide, project Perth, project Tasmania. Two alternative plans were presented to management.

One was a steady release of products throughout the summer and autumn which would have the benefit of each product having its own launch scheduling activities. The disadvantage of this was the fact that, in isolation, some of these products were, from an external market viewpoint, potentially of relatively small significance.

The second scenario discussed was that of bringing all the product launch activities together into one 'big bang'. This undoubtedly would have a far greater impact on the market but had potentially significant logistical and scheduling difficulties associated with it. In the end the decision was taken to go the 'big bang' approach. To this end Kevin Coleman was appointed as overall 'big bang' co-ordinator. As a result of this project Colossus was generated. This was the name given to all the launch activities that were to take place at a date yet to be agreed, at a location or locations yet to be agreed, with a list of products yet to be agreed. So it was quite straightforward. We were going to launch a list of yet undefined products, in a yet undefined number of locations to a yet undefined number of people, on a yet to be defined set of dates. What could be simpler.

The logistical and scheduling effort involved in co-ordinating the product development, product launch, manufacturing activities of Acorn, dovetailed into both market and customer preferences for announcement and availability of products resulted in truly a mammoth headache.

It is a tribute to the Technical and Manufacturing people that at the day of the customer and public launch all of the products were physically available and working. In typical Acorn fashion the amount of hours consumed by Acorn staff in producing slides, artwork, brochures, video footage, prototype products, packaging, were truly enormous. The trail of empty pizza boxes often testified to the previous late night's activities of various members of the marketing organisations. I suspect that some individuals even started to forget what their wives and children actually looked like.

The result and feedback from virtually every single person who had the information from the Colossus launch programme was unanimous – it was the most professional they had ever seen in Acorn's history. The range of products was wider, most sophisticated and more well targeted than ever before. The opportunities for dealers, software developers and users of Acorn equipment has never been greater. Of course the only problem with having such a successful launch as this one is the fact that the next one will have to be even better to top this one!

P. Bondar ■

We'd Like to Hear from You

Don't forget that *Acorn News* is *your* newspaper.

If you want your colleagues to know about something interesting in your department, let us know about it. Similarly, if you have – or if someone you work with has – an interesting hobby, we'd like to know about that too. ■

Acorn Gets New Network

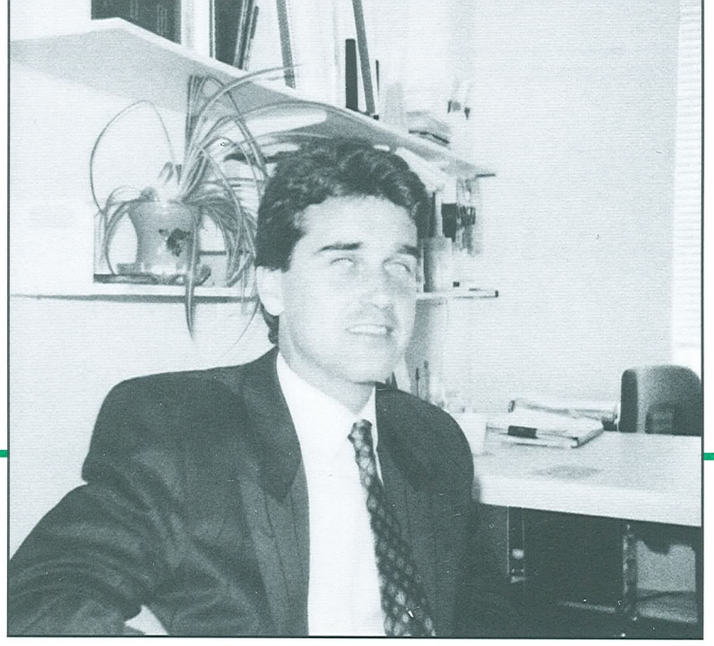
At the start of October, Acorn should have a completely new network. People using it will notice a massive improvement in performance – less waiting time – and the company expects to save around £30,000 a year.

The new network is the brainchild of Andy Smith and will replace the existing three networks: Econet, IBM serial and Ethernet. As well as reducing the bottlenecks experienced when sending data, there will be important improvements to the voice network.

To eliminate the problems of having a different telephone number for each of our two main sites, there will be a master exchange at Fulbourn Road with a slave exchange at Newmarket Road. This means people calling us will only have to ring one number and we will be able to transfer calls within the company.

Both voice and data will share the same fibre optic links to reduce our capital costs. We'll be using Mercury equipment – to reduce international costs and gain access to digital exchanges – and Cambridge Cable's fibre optic lines. As these are being laid throughout Cambridge it will be ten times cheaper for us to use these than to have Megastream lines.

Before settling on fibre optic lines, we looked at the possibility of using Mercury microwave links. However, this proved impractical because we can't 'see' Addenbrookes from both sites and the flight path of Marshalls lies between us and Madingley. ■



Peter Talbot – General Manager UK Education

Profile on Peter Talbot

Peter Talbot joined us in March 1992 as General Manager UK Education from Commodore where he was National Sales Manager for Government and Education sales.

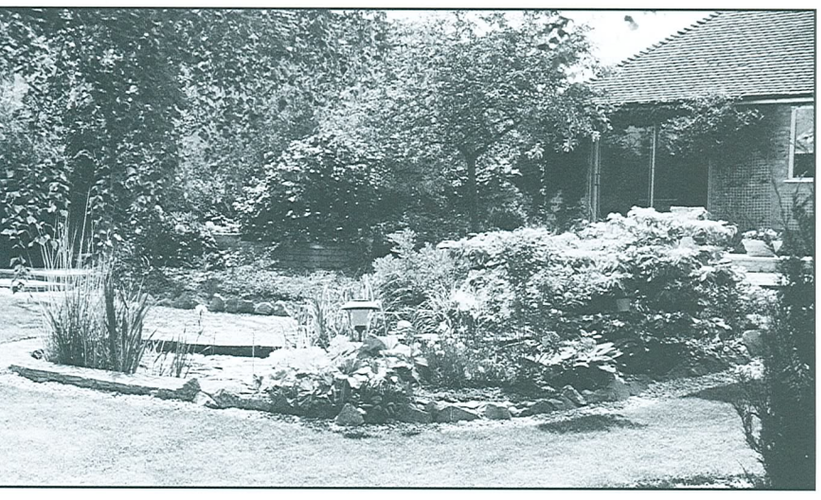
One of the first things Peter had to do when joining us was to adjust to our working style and culture. 'There are marked differences between the way Acorn does things and the way they are done at Commodore', explains Peter. 'The home computer business is very volatile and as a result lead times are even shorter at Commodore and decisions are made on the spot. Here decisions are more considered and we spend more time planning and checking against our long-term objectives. Also, being an American company, Commodore expect a return on any marketing investment within the quarter.'

Peter is 39 and the father of two boys – Tim is 6 and Jeremy is 9. His wife Louise works part-time in a travel agency. Before joining the computer industry, Peter trained as a teacher at Loughborough and taught for four years before working in sports promotion and publishing. He enjoys a variety of sports including football, cricket, tennis and squash and plays in the Acorn cricket team. ■

Val's Growing Passion

On a very hot Sunday last June, Val Janssen helped raise money for MAGPAS (the flying doctor service) by opening her garden to the public during the Haslingfield village festival. Some 50 visitors were able to admire her collection of shrubs and plants which she chose mainly for their variety of textures, shapes, colours and forms.

Val, who describes her garden as 'a haven of peace and tranquillity', has had to overcome some tricky gardening problems, including chalky soil and a sloping site. Her secret: 'plenty of manure and compost'. ■



A haven of peace and tranquillity

Kirk Wins First Squash Tournament

Following the success of the Acorn Squash Tournament, an Acorn Squash League has been formed. Twenty-nine players are competing in seven leagues, with everybody having to play everyone else in their particular league. For further information, contact Kim Liddelow.

The first prize in the Acorn Squash Tournament, a bottle of scotch and a £15 pro shop voucher, was won by Kirk Alchorne who scored a decisive victory over Gary Johnson in the final. On the same night, there was another final of a competition to decide the best of the losers from the first round of the main tournament. This was won by Richard King who defeated Martin Ley and earned himself two bottles of Australian wine and a £10 voucher.

The underdogs Richard and Martin then challenged the finalists of the main competition. In an exciting climax to the evening's entertainment, Richard totally destroyed Kirk, and Martin thrashed Gary. ■

Electronic Publishing Targeted

Acorn's newest Business Unit – Professional Sales – was formed earlier this year with the aim of taking Acorn products into professional markets.

Traditionally, Acorn's products have been used as solutions to specific problems – for example at Cadbury's and at Lucas. While applications like these are useful to demonstrate Acorn's versatility, they do not necessarily lead to further sales. What Acorn needs to establish itself within professional markets is a computing solution to a common problem, such as accounting, data processing or electronic publishing.

After a long period of research, it was decided to attack the professional market by selling a range of professional electronic publishing solutions.

Acorn's product is much less expensive than comparable systems yet outperforms its rivals in a number of areas.

However, the electronic publishing market is already dominated by Macintosh, with PC derivatives running a close second. To gain credibility in this market, Acorn has to overcome a number of hurdles.

To begin with, Acorn's products are widely used in schools. You can almost hear the professional user saying, 'Wait a minute, if my kids use this in school, how can it possibly do what I want it to do?' Then there's the thorny question of price. Our electronic publishing solution based on the A 540 costs around £4995 excluding VAT compared with £9995 for the Macintosh system, so how can our product possibly be as good?

Note we've avoided the term DTP. In the various industries that use computers for publishing, magazine editors call them electronic page make-up systems; design studios called them electronic publishing systems; whereas printers prefer to call them electronic typographic systems. The term 'DTP' is used only by publishers of parish magazines!

We believe our products will be most suited to the publishing and printing sectors. As printing presses frequently work 24 hours a day, this market is primarily concerned with reliability and, in the event of a breakdown, fast repair. ■

Dealer Skis to Work

Late August sees the annual exodus of a number of Acorn (NZ) staff on leave in search of the white powdered slopes of New Zealand's southern mountains. Coinciding with a two-week holiday period for schools, the August and September months offer the best skiing period of the year.

1992 is an exceptional year, with record snowfalls of over three metres.

For the uninitiated, New Zealand offers a wide variety of snow 'experiences' from downhill skiing to telemark, heliskiing, and motorised toboggans.

For those of a civilised (sometimes indignantly referred to as 'yuppy') frame of mind, the major commercial fields around Queenstown in the South Island have all the challenge and facilities.

If you appreciate a wilder, more pioneering spirit, there are a large number of small club fields scattered around back-country areas. These embody a typically New Zealand approach, where club members volunteer to run the T-Bars, Pomas and rope tows, and stay in club lodges based on the field.

Russell Layton, Acorn (NZ)

PS: 9.30am, 28 August 1992. Christchurch city is blanketed under snow. All aircraft are grounded and the Traffic police have advised motorists to *not* drive. All schools are closed.

Graham Jones, our intrepid, newly appointed Canterbury Education Dealer has just rung us to advise that he has to go to work to meet with his staff on urgent matters. He is *skiing* to work! ■

Ladies Team: Pat Barham, Ruth Greig, Kay Morris, Tansy Barham, Vicky Stead, Bev Stead

Technical Team: Ian Nicholas, Trevor Steele, Charlie Sturman, Graham Biss

Punting Race

Over thirty people from Acorn took part in the annual punting race held on the Cam in July. The princely sum of £232.00 was collected and donated to the Rosie Maternity Hospital's fund which hopes to raise £8,500 for a foetal heart monitor. ■

The Drawing Office – It All Starts Here!

Hidden away on the ground floor at the rear of the Newmarket Road site is the Drawing Office. This department, headed by Paul Peddar, is responsible for a wide range of tasks. These include:

PCB Design – laying all the electronic components onto the board so they all fit, and work as efficiently as possible.

Mechanical design – packaging all the computer components together within a case.

Company Records – maintaining a library of all our engineering drawings, specifications, discs, artwork, etc.

Drawing Office Manager, Paul Peddar, is assisted by Barrie Hawkins, Senior PCB Designer, Andrew Diaper, PCB Designer, Roger Sale and Philip Kaye, Mechanical Designers and Tonia Warner, Technical Clerk.

Now in his ninth year with Acorn, Barrie reckons to develop about two major new PCBs every year, each of which takes about six weeks to take to a stage where it is ready for manufacture. The rest of his time is spent making changes to existing PCBs.

In the days before the Drawing Office used CAD, it used to take about six weeks just to draw up a PCB design. 'If the design didn't work – and it often didn't – you'd have to start all over again', says Barrie. Now it takes about two weeks to position all the components, and another four weeks to do all the fine tuning.

There can be up to four PBCs in a computer including the motherboards and daughterboards like Econet cards, etc.

Apart from finding ways of fitting all the components that make up a computer into the case, mechanical designers like Roger have to ensure the computer complies with Electromagnetic Compatibility (EMC) regulations. Sometimes they also design the case itself.

The mechanical drawings are produced on CAD before being sent to outside contractors for the production of models and metal bracketry. Then a prototype is built and tested for EMC compliance, thermals and safety. 'We work very closely with the manufacturers to see if anything needs to be altered to make it easier, and therefore cheaper, to produce', explains Roger. 'It may take around five to six months to get the product ready for tooling.'

Paul Peddar is also responsible for all our archive records which go back to Acorn's first product – the Atom. These old records are kept at the back of the training unit in Newmarket Road.

'We do a great many things that people don't realise we're responsible for', says Paul. 'For example, as well as working with design engineers like Richard King, with outside manufacturers and with the Process Control Group, we work closely with Paul Garside on the production of technical documentation, and with John O'Neil with regard to the labelling of products and their outer packaging.' ■

International Sales Meet Target

Richard Sumner reports a very encouraging start to the year. Sales targets for the half-year have been achieved, in spite of the fact that this is a very difficult time for the industry in general.

We have exhibited at two major international shows:

ECOOO (Educational Computing Organisation of Ontario) in May and CeBit in Hanover during March.

The ECOOO show is held annually and is attended by all suppliers of computers in education. The show attracts visitors from the USA as well as from all over Canada. We invited teachers and pupils from Canadian schools to demonstrate our products and there were always at least three teachers on our stand throughout the show.

'Our work in Canada is beginning to pay off. We're making real progress with the school boards, particularly with the major metropolitan boards in Toronto', reports Richard Sumner.

Progress is also being made in Germany, and we are very grateful to our distributors, GMA, for helping us present our products at CeBit. New German dealers have been appointed as a result of the show, which led to a number of new sales.

There has also been a very important development in Holland where the major printing press manufacturers, A B Dick, have recently agreed to sell our DTP equipment. This will help them to offer not just printing presses but a whole range of printing solutions from pre-press to final production.

Over the coming six months we're looking forward to welcoming our international distributors at the Acorn User Show and to an even better second half of the year.

Canadian teachers and pupils enjoying a meal during the ECOOO show

Quick on the Draw

Mark Cox, who joined us in June this year and is based at Coral Park, has an exceptional talent. Working either from memory or from photos he has the ability to create caricatures. His work is of such a high standard that he has collaborated on the production of latex heads for the TV programme 'Spitting Image' and special effects sequences for films including 'Return of the Jedi', and 'Hell Raiser'.

Mark worked for 'Spitting Image' in Canary Wharf for about six months where he designed the head used to depict Mrs Thatcher and created the lips used on the model of the Queen. He left the company in 1987 when the programme was temporarily banned.

In the past, Mark's talents have also been used by local newspaper publishers, advertising agencies, etc. He is also occasionally asked to undertake various commissions on a freelance basis.

Canadian teachers demonstrating Acorn products at the ECOOO show

Acorn in the Outback

As you know, many Australian children live in remote areas far away from the nearest school. Over the years, Australia has developed a range of distance learning techniques to help these children. Nowadays these include access to radio transceivers, audio and video tapes, telephones and computers supported by regular face-to-face contact with teachers.

Learning materials are being produced using word processing and graphics software. Studies are also under way to look into the possibility of giving students direct access to databanks for library and resource materials. Some students already use computers to communicate directly with their teachers and peers.

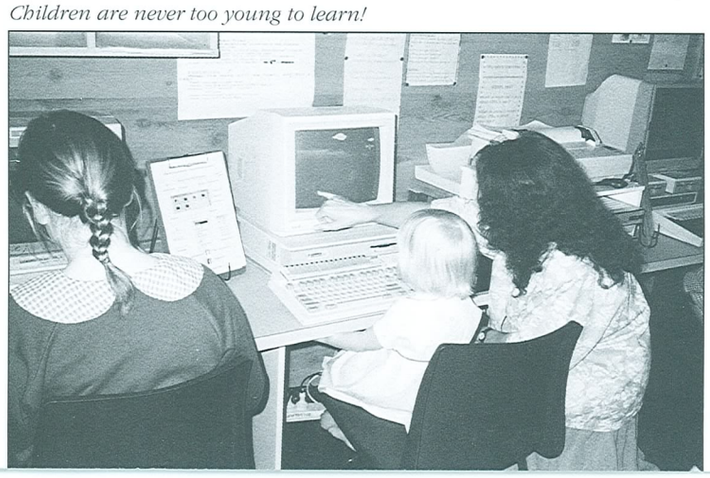
The School of the Air covers an area of about a million square miles, about half of Australia, yet has only 1,000 enrolled students. Computers purchased with the help of a government grant are loaned to individual children for a six-week period before being delivered to another home.

One Acorn dealer, Tony Plevy of Plateau Computers in Dorrigo, NSW, is putting considerable effort into introducing Acorn technology into these remote areas.

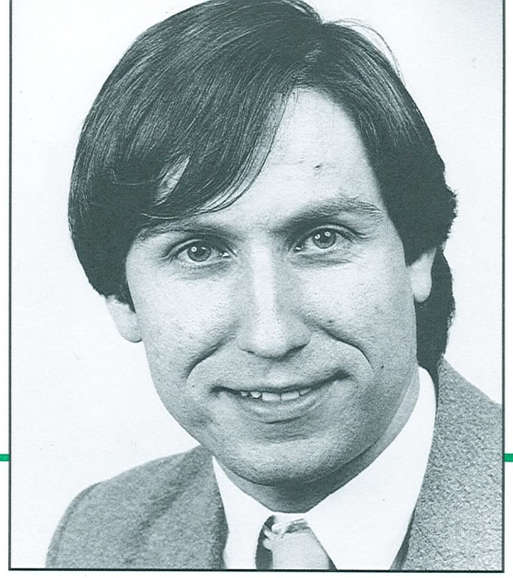
Using a brochure he designed on his own A3000, he invites schools to attend A3000 demonstrations. In addition, he offers a personal service and installation to schools as well as follow-up support.

As we gain new Acorn dealers in country areas, we can expect more and more children in the Australian outback to benefit from Acorn technology.

Children are never too young to learn!



Roger – Man of the Year



'Oh! the *Roger Wilson'* – *Man of the Year, Edinburgh 1992*

At the Edinburgh conference (28-30 August) Roger Wilson was awarded the Interactive Learning Man of the Year award by the organising committee (John Barker and his friends). At the dinner on the Saturday evening Chris Roper of Longman Logotron introduced Roger to the delegates and the essence of his speech can be found on E-mail.

Some highlights from Chris's speech were:

'Relatively few people know just how good the Acorn Archimedes is, though some of you will have recently seen demonstrations of software-only moving-video on an Archimedes. That technology, branded as Acorn Replay, is now built into products available for around £50 for use on standard classroom computers. Acorn Replay, superior in several respects to Apple's QuickTime, is again the work of Roger Wilson.'

'The significance of Apple's adoption of the ARM was largely missed by the British media; too busy researching the latest episode of Royal Soap, no doubt. But, at some point down the road, the great British media will discover Roger Wilson and produce television programmes and books about him. When that happens, you can all say, "Oh, *the* Roger Wilson". We heard about him first in Edinburgh in 1992.'

Malcolm Bird

Newsletter Readership Survey – Your Views

Thank you to everyone who responded to the Readership Survey and sent me completed questionnaires. I actually received 100 replies from the 250 questionnaires sent out.

Replies were as follows:

- Overall, how do you rate the Acorn Newsletter?

boring, not worth producing	6
good in parts	59
interesting	35
very interesting	0

- Would you like to see more articles on – in order of highest number of votes:
  1. general company news
  2. sales news
  3. staff profiles
  4. company objectives
  5. products
  6. quality
  7. Australia/New Zealand
- Is the number of pages:

too few	24
too many	3
about right	73

- Would you prefer the newsletter to be of black/white newspaper format?

yes	15
no	78
makes no difference	7

- Would you like the opportunity to contribute articles to the newsletter?

yes	62
no	38

- Do you think we should have a newsletter?

yes	98
no	0

- Should the newsletter appear

bi-monthly	39
quarterly	48
3 times a year	4
twice a year	1
monthly	6
often as possible	1
when enough articles/info	1

- Is the size/shape of the newsletter

too large	29
too small	0
about right	65
should be A4 size	6

One of the comments made sums it up, really – 'Like most things in life, we get out of it what we put in'.

62 of you said you would like the opportunity to contribute articles to the Newsletter. So I hope I'm going to see lots of interesting copy coming through from you all in the near future. Remember, the articles don't necessarily have to be business related. They might be about hobbies, holiday, social or sporting events – anything that makes interesting reading – and don't forget the photos to accompany the articles!

Lorraine Buckman

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

18 - 19 September:
Print Expo 92, Novotel, Hammersmith
21 - 22 September:
Headmasters Conference, Bruges, Belgium
29 September - 1 October:
Naidex, Wembley
8 - 14 October:
Academic Advice Roadshow, Wales
9 - 11 October:
ISIS, Business Design Centre, Islington
13 - 15 October:
Micros for Special Needs, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Oldham
22 - 28 October:
Academic Advice Roadshow, North England
3 - 4 November:
British Computer Society Disablement Group, Annual Conference and Exhibition, Camden, NW1
4 - 5 November:
Special Needs Education Exhibition, SCET, Glasgow
5 - 11 November:
Academic Advice Roadshow, South-West
11 - 12 November:
Special Needs Exhibition, Cumberland Hotel, London
12 - 14 November:
DesTech, NEC, Birmingham
18 - 19 November:
Resource Conference, Doncaster
19 - 25 November:
Academic Advice Roadshow, Midlands
23 - 27 November:
November Roadshow
3 - 9 December:
Academic Advice Roadshow, Southern England
18 December:
Acorn Staff Christmas Party

New Names, New Faces

Secretary to Managing Director
Marion Calderbank

Sales and Marketing Division
David Boughey – International Business Development Manager
Julie Dalleywater – Administrator, Channels
Saul Dobney – Market Researcher/Analyst
Adrian Eaton – Industrial Placement Student, Product Management
Jean Hines – Consumer Marketing Co-ordinator
Teresa Mysko – International Support Co-ordinator
Sharon Yoxall – Retail Sales Executive

Technical Division
Karen Brooks – Technical Author
Rupert Johnson – Industrial Placement Student
Liz Morris – Customer Services Assistant
Stewart Palmer – Software Manager

Professional Sales
Jenny Byrne – Part-time Secretary

Manufacturing and Operations Division
Mark Cox – Warehouse and Administration Assistant

Education Business Unit
Chris Morley – Regional Account Manager

Finance Division
Pauline Payne – Industrial Placement Student

Contributions to 'Comment' via E-mail

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